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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5468
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7399
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 5977
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3121
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1520
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1159
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 7645
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 8131
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000328

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SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, FEBRUARY 16-20, 2009

¶1. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for February 16-20, 2009, that did not feature in our other reporting:

- Congress Reshuffles Ahead of Elections
- NC-Congress Sweep J&K Rajya Sabha Elections
- More Jobs if BJP Elected

Congress Reshuffles Ahead of Elections

¶2. (SBU) The Congress Party carried out a relatively major organizational reshuffle on February 19 ahead of April-May national polls, bringing senior leader Ghulam Nabi Azad back into the party fold as an All Indian Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary and changing the work allocation for most other general secretaries. In addition to the AICC role, former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Azad will also take charge of election strategy for the three key electoral states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Orissa. In addition, Congress President Sonia Gandhi selected a new team to manage other states. These include: K. Keshav Rao for Jharkhand, West Bengal and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; B.K. Hari Prasad for Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Goa, Daman and Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli; and Prithviraj Chavan for Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir.

¶3. (SBU) Congress is clearly gearing up for elections with the return of Azad into the party fold. He is seen as a crafty tactician as well as a superb strategist, who has been given responsibility for key battle ground states. Described as an "amiable, soft-spoken" negotiator, party leaders are also hoping to capitalize on Azad's political experience in J&K to further consolidate Muslim vote banks in other states.

NC-Congress Sweep J&K Rajya Sabha Elections

¶4. (U) The ruling National Conference (NC) and Congress Party coalition won all four of Jammu and Kashmir's Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) seats when the newly constituted Jammu and Kashmir state assembly voted on February 13. From the Congress Party, former Chief Minister

Ghulam Nabi Azad and current Indian Water Resources Minister Saifuddin Soz were elected unopposed. Former NC Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah and NC leader Mohammed Shafi Uri comfortably defeated their independent opponent (who was supported by the Bharatiya Janata Party) but won by a narrow margin over People's Democratic Party (PDP) nominee Altaf Bukhari.

15. (SBU) The NC and Congress needed some crossover voting from independents and smaller parties to ensure that it bagged the four seats. These elections return Ghulam Nabi Azad to Delhi where he will re-take his position as a courtier in Sonia Gandhi's inner circle. With the return of Azad to Delhi, it strengthens the position of Saifuddin Soz, who now becomes the main political advisor to the Prime Minister and Sonia Gandhi on Jammu and Kashmir. He continues to wear two hats, serving as Water Resources Minister in Delhi and J&K Congress Party chief in the state. Some analysts believe that the loss of the PDP candidate in the Rajya Sabha elections does not bode well for reconciliation and stability in the state. The PDP fared surprisingly well in the J&K assembly elections and demonstrated it has a considerable reservoir of support in the valley. But, it now has no voice in either Delhi or in Jammu and Kashmir where it sits in opposition. This alienation may push the PDP to take more radical and confrontational positions on autonomy and separatism in order to consolidate its support in the valley.

More Jobs if BJP Elected

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16. (SBU) The BJP on February 14 promised to generate more jobs if elected to office. Party prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani underlined his commitment to economic stability during a briefing with leading economists. Advani expressed concern over the ruling United Progress Alliance's (UPA) handling of India's economy, noting rising unemployment and slowing projected growth. He underscored the lack of talent within the UPA, pointing out that the government had yet to appoint a permanent Finance Minister amidst international financial turmoil.

17. (SBU) Following state assembly elections defeats last December, the BJP has struggled to refine strategy and hone its message ahead of April-May national polls. The party's heated "soft on terror" rhetoric failed to capture Indian voters in Delhi and Rajasthan. Since then, the party has attempted to play to all sides by pledging continued support for a hardliner agenda while, at the same time, appealing to moderate voters by touting secular development and governance issues.

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